

## THE IRRELEVANCE OF POPULAR WILL EFFECTS ON NATIONAL WILL

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE IRRELEVANCE OF POPULAR WILL EFFECTS ON NATIONAL WILL**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This paper will focus on answering the fundamental question that military leaders need to understand: what influence do public opinion and popular will have on our national will in the context of forming and executing national military strategy? I hope to banish the “specter” of Vietnam from matters of national military strategy, and offer a different opinion with respect to the public’s role. To what extent can the American public influence or alter our national military strategy? The speed of information in the twenty-first century has affected how Americans voice their opinions, concerns, criticisms and support for the President and our elected leaders. Does this influence how our democratically elected officials and our military leaders interpret the collective national will of our nation? I will describe popular will as a subset of national will and present the actors that represent the “voice” of Americans. The effects of public opinion on national military strategy and policy are examined through political and military lenses. From this, conclusions will be drawn as to the effect of popular will on the decision to employ military power through the study of the 2006 Operation Iraqi Freedom “Surge”, and the current Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) “Surge.”

## THE IRRELEVANCE OF POPULAR WILL EFFECTS ON NATIONAL WILL

Public opinion in this country is everything.

—Abraham Lincoln<sup>1</sup>

The idea of public opinion as the driving voice behind our way of government's expression of national will through the National Military Defense Strategy has been the source of much discussion among scholars and defense officials. National will is often considered to be synonymous with popular will, which in turn is often considered to be synonymous with public opinion. A strong perception exists, particularly within the military, that popular will is fragile. But is this actually the case? And even if the answer is yes, then, in the words of Vice President Dick Cheney, "So?"<sup>2</sup>

The 1947 National Security Act established the construct by which military leaders exercise their responsibility to the Nation and the President when providing advice on the use of military force around the globe. The President and his advisors consequently have borne the responsibility of employing the military based on a collective interpretation of our national interests. The ability to sustain our military commitment to defending those national interests has also been a matter of debate since World War II.

Many argue that the Vietnam War was a watershed moment in this debate between those who believe public opinion and popular will drive our defense policies and those who believe it has little or no impact. Military leaders have been haunted by the fear that popular will is the "Achilles heel" of national security policy.<sup>3</sup> They may fear that a disillusioned public will force the government, and more specifically the President,

to limit the employment of the military element of national power and in effect, constrain America's will to win wars.

It is vital to disentangle the components of national will and especially to reject the notion that it is the same thing as popular will. In the American context, national will may usefully be seen as having two components: popular will, to be sure, but also what might be called the will of the political elite, primarily the President, the National Security Council, and Congress—with Congress acting as a link to popular will. Public opinion is related to popular will but should not be confused with it. The key questions are first, to what extent does public opinion measure popular will; and second, to what extent does public opinion or popular will actually influence national will? A corollary question, important for the military, is: to what extent does public opinion or popular will influence how we form our national military strategy?

At first glance, public opinion would seem to be a stronger factor than ever with regard to national security policy. The speed of information flow on the Internet and the ability of virtually all Americans to speak their minds through message boards, blogs, and other cybermedia have amplified how Americans voice their opinions, concerns, criticisms and support for and about the President and our elected leaders. But does this influence how our democratically elected officials and our military leaders interpret the collective national will of our nation?

I will describe popular will as a subset of national will and present the actors that represent the “voice” of Americans. The effects of public opinion on national military strategy and policy will be examined through the lenses of the political and military establishment. From this, conclusions will be drawn as to the effect of popular will on

the decision to employ military power through the study of the 2006 Operation Iraqi Freedom “Surge”, and the current Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) “Surge.”

Popular will is represented by voting Americans (constituents), wealthy political campaign contributors, and activist citizens (those who care enough to write, call or otherwise pressure their political leadership). How is popular will exercised within our democracy?

The First Amendment gives Americans the right to free speech and protection from the potentially overwhelming powers of a national government. Political speech is the cornerstone for the First Amendment. This freedom also provides the option of offering financial support to the political and policy forming process, or as professors of history Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen assert, “Money is also equal to free speech.”<sup>4</sup> With the constituency of our democracy able to voice dissent, provide willing political financial support, and express and disseminate their opinions, Americans are given the opportunity to become an integral part of the political and policymaking process. However, if public opinion is not translated into political action it is largely irrelevant.

Thus begins the debate on the relevance of public opinion and popular will in the formation of national will and national military strategy. Does public opinion and popular will matter, or should we declare its irrelevance?

## Research

In researching this topic I found that perhaps public opinion has somewhat of an impact on aspects of our national security policy decisions. Much of the analysis contains conflicting data and does not conclusively determine that the people of



America are heard or that politicians and policymakers act in accordance with their own wishes. I have focused only on those opinions that dealt specifically with national security strategy decisions and military intervention within the context of national security policy. I have also refined the temporal study by focusing on the timeframe from 1947 to the present, and posit that the National Defense Act of 1947 established the modern framework for civil military relations. Most researchers agree on two points: 1) One should be cautious about concluding that democratic responsiveness pervades American politics<sup>5</sup>; and 2) Under our system the responsibility (for national security) rests with one person - the President.<sup>6</sup>

Douglas T. Stuart, a professor in International Studies at Dickinson College and an adjunct professor at the U.S. Army War College, asserts that the 1947 National Security Act incorporated the public theory concept of institutional design which established the actors in our bureaucracy and determined their responsibilities and authority.<sup>7</sup> The National Security Act was borne out of necessity to ensure that America would avoid another “Pearl Harbor” type of attack, but more importantly it created the power players within the policymaking process.

Stuart contends that what made Pearl Harbor unique was that it actually established the concept of national security as the “lodestar” of American foreign policy. In other words, national security became the predominant factor in building the institutional infrastructure that guided foreign policy. Stuart concluded from these changed circumstances that Washington believed it needed to establish a permanent and influential place for the military at the top of the policymaking community, and that a strong military influence was essential for the development of new modes of thinking

about world affairs, based on the concept of national security.<sup>8</sup> “No more Pearl Harbors” was now understood as a non-negotiable mandate for future policymakers.<sup>9</sup>

The role of the military establishment and the authority of the President within the national security policymaking framework would be debated for the next six decades. In 1956, political scientist Gabriel Abraham Almond addressed the Army War College on the problems of public opinion and national security policy. He argued that the highly technical character of the issues, the element of secrecy, and the gravity of the stakes and risks involved created a gap in public competence of foreign policy matters which diminished informal public opinion formation.<sup>10</sup> In order to create an attentive public competent to handle the issues of national security policy, he recommended four lines of action: 1) the introduction of problems of military policy into university curricula and the development of military scholarship in the universities to produce a leadership with basic competence to understand the issues of security policy; 2) the development of soundly trained military specialists in the media of communication to ensure that the issues of security policy will be rapidly and accurately transmitted throughout the significant strata of the population; 3) the training of specialists in military policy in the major interests groups to ensure more responsible interest group pressures; and 4) the development of scholarship in political and military affairs among the military leadership to create a homogeneous leadership capable of organizing and articulating the issues in public debate.

Almond concludes that only in this way could the strengths of a democratic political process, the interplay of free minds, be introduced into the making of security

policy. Without it, we are as vulnerable in the policymaking sphere as the lack of an essential weapons system might make us in the military sphere.<sup>11</sup>

Nearly a decade had passed since the creation of National Security Act, and the debate had begun. The recognition that the power elite in Washington, to include the military establishment, were holding all the cards of national security close to their vest in order to prevent future “Pearl Harbors” would become a source of friction in the coming years.

The National Security Act had created a policymaking system that in effect operated with little or no influence from public opinion. Political scientists Daniel Cox, and Diane Duffin, concluded that prior to the Vietnam War experience the conventional wisdom held that public opinion exerted no influence on U.S. foreign policy decisions. Scholars working in Vietnam’s aftermath found episodic influence of public opinion on foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> But in public memory public opinion is often viewed as the major factor that influenced decisions regarding the conduct of the Vietnam War. Many military officers also assume this to be the case. What many scholars began to reveal was a long-term relationship between public opinion and defense spending.<sup>13</sup>

In 1975 Bruce Russett, Yale University Dean Acheson Professor of International Relations and Editor of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, began a series of longitudinal studies on public opinion in the making of U.S. foreign policy. Russett found that as U.S. opinion turned more negative toward the Vietnam War, support for defense spending also fell. As public support fell, U.S. leaders pulled back the purse strings and spent less on defense.<sup>14</sup> However, Russett found evidence of both public opinion affecting government and government affecting public opinion, but noted that in the

years after Vietnam the government responded more strongly to opinion pressure than public opinion responded to governmental pressure. This was demonstrated primarily on military spending decisions over time.<sup>15</sup> This clearly speaks to sustaining the fight after the decision has been made to project military power, but it does not address the influence of public opinion prior to the decision.

If we concede that our political system relies on the power of the people to effect change through the electoral process and that in turn effects military spending, then we must address the demographics of those groups of individuals who support or oppose military force as a matter of foreign policy.

Sociologist Val Burris, a specialist in corporate power structure, right-wing movements, gender inequality, and theories of the middle classes, found that during the Vietnam War support for military action was stronger among men, whites, the more educated, the more affluent, and younger persons. In the post-Vietnam era, men have remained consistently more supportive of military action, despite recent changes in gender roles and gender politics, and racial differences have remained strong. He also states that the gap between whites and non-whites has been most pronounced in periods of intense partisanship or when military events have sparked a “rally-round-the-flag” response. This has affected whites more than non-whites. Burris also notes the decline of support for military action by younger persons in the post-Vietnam era.<sup>16</sup>

Burris’ research found that during the Vietnam War, high-status groups (more educated and more affluent) had a stronger integration into the mainstream political culture, a closer identification with and more susceptible to the appeals of government leaders, and a greater attentiveness to the news media.<sup>17</sup> He concluded that such

persons are generally more informed and place a greater importance on foreign policy issues, are more likely to vote, contribute to political campaigns, write letters to their newspapers or members of Congress and discuss politics with friends. Perhaps most striking was the misconception that younger Americans were more opposed to the Vietnam War than older Americans. In all fourteen Gallup Polls taken between March 1966 and October 1969, a higher percentage of those age 50 and over agreed that “the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam” than those age 29 and under.<sup>18</sup>

What changed in the post-Vietnam era? The draft was eliminated and “low-intensity conflict” occupied Pentagon planners. Large numbers of ground troops deployed into conflict were avoided and military assistance to foreign governments became part of military power projection across the globe.<sup>19</sup> What has now become known as the Vietnam Syndrome perhaps has had the greatest impact on those who were young adults during the height of the Vietnam War. Burris speculates that the lessons taught by those same people in our schools could have weakened support for the military among younger Americans who were not born at the time of the Vietnam War.<sup>20</sup>

Although the people of our democracy may differ in their opinion based on a number of demographics, it is clear that they have the opportunity to voice dissent or support for military intervention in a number of ways. But should this factor into how we in the military approach how we implement and execute National Military Strategy?

Many scholars display a certain degree of hubris toward the American public and their influence on policy decisions, but Bruce Russett says it is incorrect to believe that

Americans are too confused and ignorant about national security and that they are easily manipulated into indifference or hysteria.<sup>21</sup>

Kevin Collins, a student at the Air War College in 1990, goes one step further by stating:

Public support is the essential, all encompassing glue in strategic planning. It defines the possibilities for achieving strategic objectives. Only when we are willing to sacrifice for our leaders and national interests, and only when our national leaders seriously evaluate this psychosocial element of power, will we have a national strategy worthy of the name.<sup>22</sup>

Collins wrote this as a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force while attending a senior service college in 1990. Many students at the Army War College would probably agree with him today. Both Russert and Collins address the importance of understanding public support during the planning phase of National Security strategy implementation, but political scientist John Mueller explains public support during times of war as derived from three main processes: the tendency of party identifiers to support their party leaders, the tendency of some people to follow the lead of the President no matter who he is, and the tendency of some to act in accordance with belief orientations (hawk or dove).<sup>23</sup>

Political Scientist Miroslav Nincic offers a less politically centric approach than Mueller's to contemplating the effects of public opinion on foreign policy by concluding that the foreign policy opinions of the American public are thoughtful and, when taken into consideration by leaders, are unlikely to derail sound conduct of foreign policy. These opinions are structured, stable, and they reflect quite closely the objective political circumstances they are meant to reflect.<sup>24</sup> Political scientists Page and Shapiro share a similar belief by stating that public opinion as a collective phenomenon is stable,

meaningful and rational. It is able to make distinctions and is organized in coherent patterns based on the best available information and is adaptive to new information.<sup>25</sup>

Given this collection of research, we begin to see the scholarly divergence in assessments of public opinion in foreign policy on national security matters. Two things are certain: national security decisions rest on the shoulders of the President and the protection of our democracy and the people of America is paramount to policymaking.

Our electoral system gives power to the people in the form of a vote. Once elected, our leaders will decide if they will adhere to or flaunt public opinion. In matters of foreign policy, as guided by the National Security Act, the President determines when and if we will project military power short of declaring war through Congress.

Public opinion may shape and even influence sustainment of the fight, but as I will attempt to explain, has less impact on the decision to project military power in support of national security.

### Public Opinion

I believe that public opinion and popular will have little to no impact on implementing and executing National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy. True, many scholars agree that public opinion has been a source of concern and possibly frustration for the power elite in Washington, and the President is ultimately responsible for interpreting public opinion as it relates to our National Security Strategy. But what have the scholars missed? On what points do they agree or disagree? Most importantly, have we in the military been shaped to believe that popular support in the form of public opinion is the center of gravity for successful employment of the military element of national power? If we agree that the National Security Act developed the

framework for defense policymakers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, then it important to first define the context in which the military establishment exists.

Our military establishment exists within a democracy. This is relevant to understanding how the public interacts with our government and how our government controls our military. Political Scientists Scott Bennett and Allan Stam discovered that the assumption of public support being more important to sustaining the struggle of war in a democracy than in an autocracy was flawed. Because popular support matters little in an autocracy, autocracies should win wars more often. They observed the opposite effect, with autocracies tending to fight longer wars on average than democracies, but winning less often.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, the political dimensions of our democracy can shape public opinion in relation to national security strategy and the military. If you accept the premise that public opinion effects national security policy in a democracy, then you must also admit that it may be manipulated by interest groups or politicians in order to garner support for an agenda that may not be supported by the majority of voters. This goes against the fundamental concepts within a democratic government and could be defined as something different than a “pure” democracy.<sup>27</sup> Page and Shapiro contend that much more research is needed in the processes of leadership or manipulation of opinion through the media, political rhetoric and other matters beyond opinion and policy variables within a democracy in order to draw any substantive conclusions about the extent of democratic responsiveness in policy making.<sup>28</sup>

Political realists such as Hans Morgenthau, Walter Lippman and George Kennan argue that there is a danger in public opinion forming foreign policy when the thinking



required for the successful conduct of foreign policy in a democracy can be opposed to the “rhetoric and action of the masses”. In particular, in a world dominated by power struggles, the public is more likely to be driven by moralism and emotion. This sentiment can be volatile and misguided and will ultimately undermine the reason needed to maintain national interests.<sup>29</sup>

Within our democracy it is clear that national security decisions and policies are formed through a series of checks and balances found at the seat of government. In section eight of the Constitution, Congress exercises exclusive legislation and has the power to: declare war, provide for the common defense, raise and support armies, provide and maintain a navy, make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces, and call forth the militia.<sup>30</sup>

The things that matter to Americans may be many, but those issues which make their way to the public forum for debate, and influence voting patterns may make up the key elements of popular will. In other words, if the public is willing to rally behind an issue and form coalitions of support to move their cause forward into the political process, then this becomes popular will. So then, who is responsible for determining and demonstrating America’s national will?

National will rests squarely on the shoulders of the President, and he embraces dialogue, division and potential dissent through his advisors, particularly those on National Security Council and within the Department of Defense.<sup>31</sup> Through this dialogue he forms policy and makes decisions that determine national will. He relies on the collective counsel of his cabinet to discuss and formulate decisions which result in

the President being the sole arbiter of national will, public opinion, and popular will as it relates to national security matters and in particular military force projection.

This relationship is well exemplified in our first President's approach to foreign policy decision making. Patrick Garrity describes President Washington's actions as acting against the modern dichotomy between "realism" and "idealism" in the formulation of foreign policy. President Washington agreed with both Hamilton (the supposed realist) that nations act solely out of their own interests; and with Jefferson (the supposed idealist) that there is but one standard of morality for men and nations...and even though he dearly hoped America would soon develop its own, distinct national character (which would help liberate it from the enticements of both the French and the English and the divisions the sought to foster) he added the admonition that we required "a decent respect for opinions of mankind." <sup>32</sup>

It is within the construct of American democracy that senior military leaders function as advisors to their civilian masters. We should understand the scholarly research that has been developed over time in relation to our national security strategy and decision making process. We cannot accept simple solutions to complicated relationships between the people we serve and protect and the government we represent within the military element of national power.

#### Case Studies: The Surge in Iraq, 2006-2007 and the Afghanistan "Surge," 2010

The 2006 "Surge" during Operation Iraqi Freedom affords a good illustration of how a President can successfully disregard public opinion. On January 10, 2007 President Bush announced his plan referred to as "The Surge." He stated the following to the American people:

The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people -- and it is unacceptable to me. Our troops in Iraq have fought bravely. They have done everything we have asked them to do. Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me.<sup>33</sup>

In his summation he indicated a need for a change in the Iraq strategy based on advice from his national security team, military commanders, diplomats, allies, distinguished outside experts and Congress. The difference maker would be an increase in force levels in order to hold those areas previously cleared of but now regained by terrorists and insurgents. The commitment would be 20,000 additional troops.<sup>34</sup>

In 2006 midterm elections were held, and for the first time in twelve years the Democrats held a majority in the House of Representatives and Senate. The *Congressional Quarterly* called the election a “vote of no confidence in President Bush’s handling of the War in Iraq.” The President recognized that “Americans voted to register their displeasure with the lack of progress being made in Iraq.” Yet despite this statement, President Bush chose to increase troop levels in Iraq in contradiction to public opinion expressed in the electoral process.<sup>35</sup>

Public support for the Iraq War had begun to drop off since the initial decision in March 2003. According to ABC News and *Washington Post* polls, January 2004 was the last time Americans had expressed support for President Bush and his decision to enter Iraq by military force.<sup>36</sup> Clearly the President and his advisors chose to disregard public opinion, even if it was expressed in the most measurable terms through votes.

On March 13, 2008 then Lieutenant General Raymond Ordierno commented on the results of The Surge by saying, “Obviously, it's entirely too early to declare victory and go home, but I think it's safe to say that the surge of Coalition forces--and how we

employed those forces--have broken the cycle of sectarian violence in Iraq. We are in the process of exploiting that success."<sup>37</sup>

In September 2008, 50 percent of Americans believed the surge was making the situation better in Iraq; 30 percent thought it was not making an impact; and 10 percent thought it made the situation worse.<sup>38</sup> October of 2008 found 45 percent of Americans wanting to keep troops in Iraq until a stable government was established and 51 percent wanted to bring the troops home as soon as possible.<sup>39</sup> According to sociologist Val Burris in 2008, the Iraq War presented a striking example of countervailing tendencies in public opinion along the dimensions of education and income where Americans with high levels of income tended to be associated with support for military action and Americans with high levels of education tended to oppose military action. This, Burris says, can be traced to the intersection of income and education with the Republican and Democratic parties.<sup>40</sup>

In the face of doubting Americans, President Bush maintained his responsibility as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and his authorities, and those of the civil-military national security structure, given under the National Security Act of 1947.

Given the public opinion data before, during, and after the Surge, one can deduce that despite negative opinions and a dramatic change in the political representation at the seat of government, the sitting President continued to do what he thought was right for the national security of the Nation. The responsibility of demonstrating national will in the face of public opposition fell on his shoulders.

On December 1, 2009, President Obama announced an increase of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. This was

done under a cloud of controversy between civil-military authorities in the aftermath of a leaked classified report of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. But to what extent did public opinion play a role in President Obama's decision?

The 2008 election was by all accounts a referendum on political, economic and foreign policy change. The political rancor was immense and ultimately change won. Yet despite the clarity from the American people, the President found himself in the position of being responsible for upholding national will through decisive national security policy implementation.

After his decision to send more troops to Afghanistan, 56 percent of Americans polled through the *MoveOn.Org Political Action* website opposed any escalation, 4 percent were willing to send more troops, and 40 percent supported the President's plan.<sup>41</sup> Opposition to the War in Afghanistan was considerable within the President's own party with 56.2 percent of *MoveOn.Org* members against the war.<sup>42</sup>

As reported in *The Nation* on December 7, 2009, Pearl Harbor Day, "the ghost of President Lyndon Johnson's re-election surrender haunts President Obama." Additionally, *The Nation* claimed the President was trying to reach the voting demographic of "older, whiter, middle-and working class men and women in rural and suburban Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Tennessee, Michigan, etc."<sup>43</sup>

In the face of this type of criticism, President Obama is still responsible to uphold the same oath of office as President Washington and embody national will as he demonstrated during his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. Americans became aware that the President must transcend party politics at times and be a steward of our national security. The focus of his speech was on the paradox that peace often is

achieved only through the horror of armed conflict, and he defended the United States' history of military excursions as campaigns to safeguard "freedom and prosperity."<sup>44</sup>

Both of these studies demonstrate that public opinion had minimal impact on determining America's National Security Policy; and the President, not the military, must ultimately decide when and how to use the military element of national power. If the military establishment focuses on gaining public support and vacillates in the winds of public opinion vice executing national military strategy, America will become more vulnerable to her enemies abroad and at home.

### Conclusion

Research supports the argument that public opinion is in the eye of the beholder when it comes to having any significant impact on how the President and the military establishment actually form and execute national security strategy and national military strategy. Morgenthau, Lippman and Kennan agree that there is an inherent danger when incorporating the "rhetoric and action of the masses" in the formulation of foreign policy. This naïve and emotional sentiment can often be misguided and interpreted by policymakers in a manner that may ultimately undermine the reason needed to maintain national interests.<sup>45</sup>

Accepting the premise of a cause and effect relationship between public opinion and policymaking in a democracy is also admitting that public opinion can be swayed by special interest groups or politicians for the purpose of supporting hidden or exposed agendas. This could be counter-intuitive to the concept of a "pure" democracy.<sup>46</sup> As Page and Shapiro admit, much more research is needed in the areas of manipulation of opinion through the media, political rhetoric and other matters beyond opinion and

policy variables in order to draw any substantive conclusions about democratic responsiveness in policymaking.<sup>47</sup>

Initiating military intervention in support of national security strategy may be viewed differently than sustaining military action over the long term. John Mueller examined public support during times of war and derived three main processes for interpreting public opinion: the tendency of party identifiers to support their party leaders, the tendency of some people to follow the lead of the President no matter who he is, and the tendency of some to act in accordance with belief orientations (hawk or dove).<sup>48</sup>

The shadow of Vietnam has long loomed over national security policymakers, and many planners in the military establishment refer to that era as a watershed moment for public opinion and its influence over our political leaders. Daniel Cox and Diane Duffin concluded that the conventional wisdom before the Vietnam War held that public opinion exerted no influence on U.S. foreign policy decisions, and scholars working in Vietnam's aftermath found episodic influence of public opinion on foreign policy.<sup>49</sup> So why does our public memory seem to support the ghost of Vietnam?

Page and Shapiro contend that what has now become known as the Vietnam Syndrome perhaps has had the greatest impact on those who were young adults during the height of the Vietnam War, and it is possible that the lessons taught by those same people in our schools could have weakened support for the military among younger Americans who were not born at the time of the Vietnam War.<sup>50</sup>

Although many scholars and professional war fighters still believe that Vietnam accentuates the effect of public opinion on national strategy policymakers, the study of

the 2006 and 2009 Presidential decisions to surge troops in Iraq and Afghanistan can begin to open minds to the reality of making military excursions in the face of dissenting public opinion. Public opinion is not as important to the protection of our national security as we have been led to believe.

## Endnotes

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 33.

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